

IN SEARCH OF ONE'S OWN SELF. IDENTITY OF THE BULGARIAN MUSLIMS (POMAKS). A CASE STUDY FROM THE WESTERN RHODOPE

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The identity of the Bulgarian Muslims has been scarcely attracting scholarly attention at different historical periods. Under socialism in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian Muslims (referred to also by the pejorative name “Pomaks”)¹ were rarely an independent object of investigation and were presented under the denomination of the “nation-state” (Georgieva 1999: 59; Brunnbauer 1999: 35-36). Since the political change in 1989, their culture, history and identity have been drawing the attention of quite a number of people and within a comparatively short time they have become the object of widespread interest both on the part of the Bulgarian, and of the international research community (cf. a review of literature in Georgieva 1998: 286-308; Georgieva 1999: 59; Konstantinov 1997; Brunnbauer 1999:38)². The heightened research interest has been addressed not only to Bulgaria, but also to the other Balkan countries, whereby special attention should be given to the appearance of publications on “the Pomaks” in Greece and by Greek researchers (cf. Tsibiridou 1995: 53-70; Tsibiridou 1998: 185-196; Tsibiridou 2000 and the literature quoted there; Markou 2002: 41-53; Michail 2003).

The heterogeneous and disputed character of the identity of the Bulgarian Muslims has also been analysed. What has been noted: a) a Bulgarian identification by the sign of language belonging; identification depending on the religion; b) as Muslims; c) “Pomak” identity “in the ethnic meaning of the word”; d) Turkish identity (Brunnbauer 1999:38). Evangelos Karagiannis, the author of the monographic study on the ethnicity of “the Pomaks” in Bulgaria³, also presents a more-detailed classification, adding nuances to the “Muslim-Pomak”, “Bulgarian-Muslim”, “political-Pomak” options of the identification (Karagiannis 1997: 60; cf. also Karagiannis 2000: 149-153). Featuring among the basic theses of Karagiannis is that concerning “the theory of marginality as a theory of the alternative possibilities” (Ibid. 3). What is followed in the course of the book is the idea of opportunistic operation (in the terms of profit and benefit) with “the shifting” identity.

Karagiannis, as well as other authors, put forward as a problem the symbolic equalising of the identity with the element of origin of the Bulgarian Muslims (a feature, characteristic of mythological thinking). The equalisation is in the opposite way also characteristic of the vernacular discourse, of “the collective memory” of the Bulgarian Muslims, but also of a considerable share of the interpretations that Bulgarian historiography offers on the matter. Throughout almost the entire 20th century the latter was dominated by romantic views. Islamisation has been presented as the result of the brutal massive violence exercised on the Bulgarian population during the Ottoman period; on the other hand, the cultural

¹ “*The Pomaks* are a mountainous population, now living in five Balkan countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Macedonia, Albania and Turkey.[...] All of them are speaking the Bulgarian language which, in the high parts of the mountains, has preserved a multitude of archaic forms in the grammatical structure and the vocabulary. [...] The language is the first visible difference with the Bosnian Muslims, who are speaking Serbian.” (Georgieva 1998: 287). The characterisation, offered by Bulgarian historian Tsvetana Georgieva, is similar to the views of “external” observers: “The Bulgarian Muslims (i.e., the Pomaks) are a religious minority. They are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but whose religion and customs are Islamic” (Poulton 1993: 111); cf. also Brunnbauer 1999: 39.

² I have listed here only the most important monographic studies, published during the past 14 years: Karagiannis 1997; Telbizova-Sack 1999; Tsibiridou 2000; Raichevski 1998; Ivanova 2002.

³ Karagiannis’s work (1997) is mostly built on observations from the region of the town of Madan and this, by and large, determines also the inferences, drawn by this author.

characteristics of the Bulgarian Muslims was reduced to their (Bulgarian) origin.⁴ This explanatory model was profoundly internalised amidst a great share of Bulgarian society, as well as being politically put to use (most of all under socialism) as the “scientific” excuse for the policy of assimilation, pursued for decades. As a response to this, some quasi-historical (essentially – political) legends and mythological models cropped up among the Bulgarian Muslims concerning their origin. Through them the transitory or vacillating identity of the Bulgarian Muslims was coded (or expressed) under one or another form.⁵ These narratives bring to the fore the idea about an Arabic, Slavic, Proto-Bulgarian, “Turkic”, “Asiatic”, Tatar, etc. origin of the Muslims, or their origin goes back to the “peygambers”, the earliest prophets of Islam. These legends reveal the existence of a collective “stress from history” and a refusal to accept the interpretations, which assign the Bulgarian Muslims the non-prestigious and humiliating role of “apostates” and “traitors” (Lozanova 1998: 455; Grebenarova 1998: 56).

Objectives and methods of the investigation. The objective of this short investigation is restricted within the discussion of the manifestations of vacillating identity in one big village (population of 5500) – the village of Draginovo, Velingrad region, inhabited by a compact Bulgarian Muslim population and a smaller group of Roma. The village is in the region of the Western Rhodopes. Its former name was Korova and, to a certain extent, its historical fate has been illustrative of the community of Bulgarian Muslims, insofar as originating from it is the best known home source of forced Islamisation, viz. the chronicles of Priest Metodi Draginov (for greater details about this, cf. Grozdanova 1993: 146-157; Kiehl 1998: 65-68). The village has received its present-day name in commemoration of that same chronicler.

The observations have been conducted during six short field research studies (each one lasting several days) in 1996, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002 and 2003. In this way the recurrent meetings with the same people make it possible to follow the changes in their behaviour and in their discourse strategies. Scores of formal interviews have been taken on various problems of the everyday culture and ritual practices, but the basic and most important method was observation, including participant observation, too. The contacts with the local inhabitants were not confined only to visits to the village; they also continued during their visits to Sofia. The present lecture was given to them to read in 2003 (after long hesitations and fearing possible disapproval), but it was received by positive comments.

Here the attention will be focussed less on the operation with the changes in the identity, depending on the social and cultural context (i.e. depending on how it was more beneficial for an individual to be presented in some or in other circumstances), because this was done in Karagiannis’s publications. This strategy has no doubt a presence in Draginovo, too. My investigation, however, brings to the fore not so much the opportunistic manipulation of the identity (in terms of profit and benefit), as some genuine vacillations, often painful, and in a personal psychological aspect; the search for identity as an answer to the question “who I am”.

A clear expression of these vacillations is
the cultural diglossia,

⁴ Not all the Bulgarian historians were swept by that romantic model: cf. Moutafchieva 1963: 115-128. In the 1990s a greater number of publications came out both in Bulgaria and outside the country, which subjected to critical reinterpretation the thesis about the massive coercive nature of Islamisation in Bulgaria (Zhelyazkova 1997: 11-56; Kiehl 1998: 56-82; Georgieva 1998: 289-294. For convincing empirical arguments against this thesis, cf. Radoushev 2003: 152-197).

⁵ This oral Muslim quasi-history has specially been discussed by Lozanova (1998), Grebenarova (1998: 56). The matter is mentioned by Georgieva 1998: 296-297; Georgieva 1995: 154; Karagiannis 1997; Konstantinov 1997: 37; Balikci 1999: 54-55; Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001: 126-148).

which has several manifestations: *discourse practices, the use of the personal names, the female wear, the domination of the settlement over the group identity, Yoga* amidst a group of intellectuals and their role in the *opening up of the village to the world*.

Discourses, dedicated to the identity. In view of the finesse of the question and the understandable distrust of the Bulgarian Muslim population, the strategy of field research, planned in advance, did not envisage the taking of formal interviews on identity. It turned out, however, that the direct discussion of the matter proved impossible to avoid, insofar as the very presence of an outsider in the rural community spontaneously provoked conversations on the problem. The spearheading of the dialogue along this line on the part of the local people is a kind of a check of “the trustworthiness” of “the outsider”, as well as an expression of the inner need to speak on a topic, clearly emotional and traumatic. As everywhere else and always during field research in Bulgaria, the starting point for a conversation is the profession of the interviewer. The standard attitude of those interviewed is to accept the ethnologist (folklorist, historian) as a journalist, and no explanations whatever can shake that conviction of theirs.

The village of Draginovo was no exception, either. During my first two visits the question regarding the profession of the interviewer and the detailed answer about the academic nature of the occupations were followed by another question: as “a learned person” I was to determine what they, the Bulgarian Muslims, were. The diplomatic, but essentially frank answer that this is a question to which everyone should personally give himself the answer, because he/she alone has the right to determine his/her ethnic belonging, provoked an explanation regarding the personal opinion of the informant. Referring to the prestige of his deceased father, in 1997 M.M. (a worker, born in 1942) developed “the Slavic thesis” about the origin of the population of the village of Draginovo, making one symptomatic addition, too. That addition coded the dual landmarks of the identity: the inhabitants of Draginovo had allegedly an ancient Slavic root, but their present-day cultural image was due to the mixed marriages of Bulgarian mothers and Turkish fathers; the inhabitants of Draginovo had inherited the language from their mothers, and the faith – from their fathers.

After this dialogue, which seemed successful, the follow-up of the conversation promised for the following day, did not take place, under the pretext of an emergency consisting in the slaughtering of the calf on precisely that day.

My next meeting with M.M. took place two years later, in 1999. The presence of a group of students from the New Bulgarian University confirmed without any further discussions the academic nature of my occupations, while the time that had elapsed from our first meeting had proven that I had not betrayed the trust and hospitality of the local people. Unprovoked, again, M.M. began to speak about identity, this time, however, it was not the settlement identity, but his own identity. In the friendly atmosphere, enhanced by the serving of coffee, M.M. explained to the group that he was a Pomak and that meant that he was a Bulgarian because he was speaking the Bulgarian language, but was a Muslim by faith. In this sense, to him the definition of Pomak had no humiliating meaning by itself. This was stated in front of eight running tape recorders.

The evolution and the change in the standpoint of M.M. are obvious... It cannot be said whether this was due to a reconsidered position during the past two years or was just a reflection of the existence of trust, which had been absent during the previous conversation. This time M.M. had abandoned the idiom of history and was interpreting the identity by itself, and not the origins – invented or real. In fact his definition fairly precisely reflects the real cultural dimorphism of the Bulgarian Muslims. During that same year 1999, a similar self-characterisation was given, also on her own initiative, by schoolmistress A.B., born in 1967. The situation of being subjected to trial through questions about my view about the Pomak identity was repeated once again during field research in 1999. This time the questions came

from a person with whom I had also talked during earlier investigations in 1996 and 1997. To his question “What, do you think, we are” (asked again in the presence of a group of students) I answered in the same way to the effect that identity was a personal choice. The question was asked by the young M.K., who defined him via his being part of the circle of young men and women with higher education – the so-called “intelligentsia” in the village. This also explains to some extent his further comment on our conversation. Without getting into any details, whatever, M.K. stated that he could see “nothing Turkish” either in himself or in his fellow villagers and that this was a common stand in the village, with the exception just of some of “the old ones”. This unforced frankness came only during our third meeting, more than three years after our first getting acquainted, which, by the way, had started with overt hostility and distrust on his part. M.K.’s stand can be determined also by the cosmopolitanism, unusual for the fans of the theory about “encapsulated communities”, of that same group of intellectuals – a question I shall discuss further on.

The existence of different discourses or even the (hypothetical) change in the views regarding the identity cannot be exhausted by the above-listed ones. The new theses that have come to the fore in Bulgarian historiography, rejecting the romantic view of the coercive massive enforcement of Islam had infiltrated the village and had been accepted by the most enlightened representatives of the community. In 2001, two of them, enjoying indisputable prestige not only in Draginovo but in the nearby town of Velingrad, too, directly referred to the publications of Vera Moutafchieva, an outstanding historian Ottomanist, and a writer (cf. here). At different times, both emphasised that they accepted her view of the voluntary nature of the Islamisation during the Ottoman period as a means of attaining a higher social and economic status in society. The adoption (moreover from the original source) of a scholarly hypothesis comes to show the existence of a different kind of discourses regarding the identity, as well as the Bulgarian Muslims’ ability not only to generate legends but also to analytically interpret their problems.

According to the precise observations of Brunnbauer (1999: 48), both the Bulgarian Muslims and the formal Bulgarian historiography are paradoxically confronted with one and the same problem: the conception of identity as a monolithic substance determined once and for all. The Bulgarian Muslims’ impossibility to fit in into this model is painfully experienced by them. In cases of spontaneous communication they share their feelings of personal dejection and inferiority complexes, their confusion, when confronted by the irony and slight, fairly often shown to them by the representatives of the majority – the Bulgarian Christians.⁶

Obviously, the Muslim religion is not always associated with a powerful and positive identity. In this way vacillation is a key feature of the identity in Draginovo. Apart from the strenuous processes of searching for one's own self, that vacillation finds expression in quite a few of the cultural practices in the village. It is easy to understand that since the attempts at assimilation, on the part of the Bulgarian state had been expressed, first of all, in the change of the Muslim Arabic and Turkish names by Bulgarian ones, this is to this day a sensitive matter of considerable symbolic (semiotic) potential.

The names

in Draginovo are used in several different ways. What is meant is not so much the choice of the name, itself, at childbirth, or while filling in the personal documents (Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001 dwells on this matter). The manipulative operation with the name, for its part, (for instance, in view of travels outside the frontiers of Bulgaria, what is preferred is that featuring in the passport be a Bulgarian name with a Slavic ring), explains why the members of some

⁶ Similar negative self-evaluations have also been noted elsewhere in the Rhodopes among the Bulgarian Muslims: the (self) definition as “Pomak” also means “a simple person, dirty, lacking any culture, backward, mountaineer, ill-intentioned, wild, unbridled, etc. to accept a low symbolic status in a society, which attracts you and in which you endeavour to get integrated”, Garnizov 1997: 71

families have different family names: some of them have wished to have their Muslim names in their passports, others – their Bulgarian names. In this case, this is a matter of multiplicity in *the real usage* of the names in everyday communication. On the one hand, both within the community and outside it, people are known by several names. Small children up to the age of three, which are now learning to speak, are trained to do this, too: to introduce themselves in front of unfamiliar people (as I and the university students were) by their two names. Regardless of which of the two the child gives – the Bulgarian or the Muslim, it is spurred on by its mother to say its “other name, too”. My decision, when looking for the home of someone, to ask about him or her using his or her Muslim name, which I expected to have become confirmed in the community, was not much of a help to me. In every case, when I asked about someone in the village, what mandatorily followed were a few minutes of thinking and a great number of specifications. The lack of knowledge of the formal names, no matter whether Bulgarian or Muslim, has been due to the massive use of *nicknames* as a dominant way of personal identification in the village. The inhabitants of Draginovo assess this practice as a feature specific for the village and that is why the school director M.N. had registered a multitude of nicknames, which he dictated to me in December 1996. M.N. explained the preference for the use of nicknames by the great number of cases of coincidence of the personal and family names in the village, which allegedly was the source of confusion and it was not clear who precisely was meant. In principle, the nicknames also have a humbling connotation and those in Draginovo are no exception.

Of course, nicknames are not and cannot be a specificity of Draginovo alone. Their active usage, however, to a degree whereby they almost completely substitute the real names, can probably be explained as a strategy of *avoiding the making of a choice between the Muslim and the Bulgarian name*.

Notwithstanding the trends, common for the village, the usage of names varies individually. A.K., a worker, born in 1937, has the prestige of the best singer in the village and has indeed justified that reputation of his. When we were recording his songs (a trio performance with other two singers, released in a CD y GeGa Music), we had to specify the name. The singer was introduced to me by a Bulgarian name and by his nickname. I asked him about “the other” (i.e. the Muslim name), and how he wished that I should address him. His choice was the Muslim name. Children usually introduce themselves to unfamiliar people by their Bulgarian name alone. Part of the young people do the same, as do people of the group describing itself as “the intelligentsia”. Another part of the young people in the village introduce themselves by their Muslim first names, but by their paternal and family names with a Slavic ending in -ov, -ev, -ski. Middle-aged people introduce themselves by their Bulgarian names, but after some time of mutual exchanges and communication they also tell their Muslim names. The great diversity in the usage of the names brings to the fore the individual differences in the personal identification, but this is also a common evidence of the vacillating cultural identity. Different artifacts also bear signatory loading of the specific cultural diglossia. This is particularly valid with respect to

the female wear.

It is noteworthy here that in the traditional women’s costume, which is actively in use to this day, though somewhat modified, the shalwars are absent, which are a popular image of the Muslim otherness in the Bulgarian people’s mass consciousness. Worn to this day in the village, is the traditional old one-apron costume and the popular “multicoloured stockings” which, in their everyday variant, are white and have no coloured patterns. Moreover, the substitutes of the shalwars – the training suits, which are characteristic of other Muslim settlements, can be seen comparatively rarely here. Unlike other villages in the Western Rhodopes, where women wear shalwars, made out of industrially

manufactured materials, the women in Draginovo combine elements of the traditional hand-woven costume with the *mantas* - female upper clothes made of industrially manufactured materials, substitutes of the ancient hand-woven *aladji*. Women wear daily this in-between type of costume. But when travelling outside the borders of the village, they abandon it and replace it by standard European wear. ("If you see me out of Draginovo, you will not recognise me", this is a typical women's comment, imparted moreover somewhat proudly).

The holiday wear, however, is almost completely traditional. Girls – children and pupils - go to school or attend the kindergarten dressed up in standard European wear. On a holiday, however, they also put on the traditional hand-woven costumes. In 1997 a mother spoke about how difficult she found it to make "everything twice", i.e. to secure two different sets (traditional and modern) of clothes for her daughter, which she was to wear on different occasions. The girl went to school in European clothes; since she liked one of her schoolmistresses, she wanted to have a set of clothes like hers. Since the conversation was held on a day, which was a Muslim calendar holiday, I had the opportunity of seeing the girl, then a five-grade pupil, change into a traditional costume. Already dressed up in this way, she imparted that she found the traditional clothes, hand-woven by her mother, more beautiful than those she wore going to school.

The same child, however, two years later, in 1999, was already the first girl from Draginovo to be sent by her parents to attend a secondary school outside the region. The nearby town of Velingrad is just three kilometres away from Draginovo and this makes it easier to get secondary education without leaving the village. The choice of the family to send their daughter to another town was prompted by their ambition that she receives a better education; currently, the girl is attending a foreign language school. This choice is not accidental: the girl belongs to a family, which is part of the group of the intelligentsia. That choice indicates, moreover, the parallel coexistence of two systems of values: traditional and modern.

Obviously, the second had gained the upper hand in this case. It is difficult to assess whether actions like this one mean the beginning of the overcoming of the alienation from the state.

The cultural diglossia has other manifestations, as well. The traditional sign feature, the expression of local identity, tends to focus in the weddings. The everyday life is dominated by more varied sign features – not only and not so much in the clothing, but in the behaviour, too. A change has been observed in the conduct of women and digression from the role, traditionally assigned to them by Islam. In the populous village there are several coffeehouses, drink bars, pizza houses and one restaurant, well kept and visited by guests from different towns in the country. One of the coffeehouses is next to the mosque and its customers are elderly men, attached to the religious values. In most of the coffeehouses only men are the customers. Between 1997 and 1999, however, a pizza house was opened in Draginovo, which is as good in its menu, sanitation and services as any one of the expensive pizza houses in Sofia. The picture inside the pizza house is as curious as it is indicative. Small groups of boys and young men can be seen seated and, separately, young girls with heads scarves seated to enjoy a piece of cake. The pizza house is a novelty for the village and is obviously a replica of the youth places of entertainment, common throughout Bulgaria, and that is why it has rapidly found its customers precisely among the young people. The presence of girls there is an indication of a certain freedom as far as the attitude to them goes, but their separation into a homogeneous female small group comes to show that this freedom does not imply complete emancipation with respect to the traditional values and gender roles. In other words, the norms of behaviour, specific of Islam, are followed half way and this is also a sign of vacillating identity.

The recent past of the village should be considered in order that the sources of these vacillations, often tortuous and conflict-prone, could be fully comprehended. The interviews have shown that this is one of the settlements where the attempts at cultural assimilation had particularly painfully been endured. Such attempts had been made, as this is well known, repeatedly, at various periods since 1912, with respect to the Bulgarian Muslims. Schoolmistress A.B. has a painful childhood memory of the change of names in the early 1970s. At that time she had been five years old and her entire family had fled from home and had hid in the forest in the course of a week. To commemorate that trial, her father built a fountain at the site where they had hid.

Without underestimating the responsibility of the Bulgarian authorities in the past regarding the policy to the Bulgarian Muslims, I have to emphasise that today the political space, freed from the state pressure of reprisals, is occupied by other political figures, who are no less ambitious. Their actions today contribute to the intensification of the cultural diglossia and hence – to the continuing vacillations in the identity. On the one hand, this is the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)⁷, the party of the Turkish minority, and on the other – the Islamic missionaries. Traces and indirect evidence can be found in the village of the activity of either. So, directly after “the return of the names” of the Muslims in Bulgaria (by a legislative act of December 29, 1989, allowing the resumption of the Muslim names after the periods of their enforced replacement by Bulgarian ones under socialism), in 1990 a particularly crowded circumcision (“*sunet*”) was held in Draginovo, turning into a political rally with the participation of many thousand people. The event has been recorded by an amateur video film and it is a document of a classical example of the political (mis)use of tradition. Following the traditional rules of Islam, the circumcision (“*sunet*”) is held, whereby in one village (in this case Draginovo) families and relatives of boys, who are to undergo circumcision, gather from several villages. The same happened in 1990: the village was extremely overcrowded by guests from the neighbouring villages. Before the very act of circumcision, a multitudinous political rally was held, addressed by political leaders from the MRF, including Ahmed Dogan, the head of the party. In his speech, he leveled accusation (justified!) not only at the socialist administration, but generally at the Bulgarian state, too. Other speakers were Islamic clergymen, and their speeches revealed a connection with the Islamic fundamentalists. The Islamic missionaries have been active during the past few years. Their agitation, however, has not succeeded in exerting a lasting influence, in the final count. The underlying reason is that part of the missionaries’ sermons is in direct contradiction to the local cultural traditions and values. In 1999 I heard the same commentaries from several people: the inhabitants of Draginovo did not sympathise with the missionaries because of the latter’s attempts to encourage cross-cousin marriages, which here (as, by the way, everywhere else in Bulgaria) are assumed to be incestuous.

The exercises of varied political and cultural pressure (in the past and during the time of “the transition”), as well as the overall historical and cultural heritage, apparently do not contribute to the overcoming of the vacillations in the identity and the stress ensuing therefrom. In this connection it is noteworthy that the inhabitants of the village of Draginovo lack the feeling of relationship with the rest of the Bulgarian Muslims in the country, even with those from the villages closest to Draginovo. The preferences (closely followed to this day) for the conclusion of marriages within the settlement community are enhancing this trend. Efforts were needed to establish that the only other settlement community with which Draginovo had been connected until the middle of the 20th century was the nearby village of Kostandovo. The contacts were mostly maintained with that village. The only mention of Bulgarian Muslims from another community outside Draginovo was on the occasion of the invitations,

⁷ Regarding the policy of the MRF to the Bulgarian Muslims, cf. Brunnbauer 1999: 38-39.

sporadically received from the Korova quasi-professional folk ensemble with the local community club to play at weddings in other villages.

It would be imprecise to claim that this is due to closeness or isolation. “The collective memory” keeps the memory that in the middle of the 19th – early 20th century the transportation of loads and commodities had been the livelihood of the men from Draginovo and that they had also traveled to comparatively faraway places in Bulgaria. Under socialism (and partially to date) not only men, but women, too, are working in the nearby town of Velingrad. There are men in the village who have worked abroad (the Soviet Union, Libya, today Greece, Sweden, etc.). This means that closeness is no explanation for the absence of a sense of belonging to the community either of the Bulgarian Muslims or of the Muslims in the country as a whole. Naturally, the identification is not subject to measurement, but the lack of interest in the rest of the Bulgarian Muslims can be interpreted as

overwhelming identification with the village community,

and, conversely, *too weak identification with the confessional group as a whole*. This emphasis on the village affiliation can possibly be again a kind of a flight from unambiguous identification. It is a sure bet that an explanation can also be sought in the emphatic intensive social and emotional ties within the village community. The higher relative weight of the village identification also complies with the real and visible differences of the level of local culture among the different “Pomak” enclaves (differences on the level of vernacular dialect, of the identification strategies in the local folklore, in the way of clothing, etc.⁸). All of this should make the researchers particularly cautious. The summing up of the observations, conducted in one locality, and their transfer to extend over the entire Bulgarian Muslim population conceals the real hazard of wrong conclusions – a dangerous prospect in view of the bitter past experience.

Yet another original phenomenon is noteworthy. There is a group of families in Draginovo, defining themselves as

Yoga.

In the very first home I visited in 1996, I saw a portrait of an Indian guru. In schoolmistress A.B.’s home there is a portrait of Buddha, and in another family I happened to meet a young man reading Buddhist literature. As a whole, these are families, interrelated by kinship and/or friendship in which the one or both partners in the marriage have university education. It is hard to say in how far Yoga can be discussed as a sign of affiliation to Buddhism; the representatives of the community, themselves, however, insist on the definition “Yoga”. Their commitment to Yoga definitely far exceeds the occupations associated with self-improvement (physical and spiritual), popular in the present-day globalising world. The data I have at my disposal regarding the forms of practicing of Yoga are restricted, because part of the informants refused to comment details on this matter, considering it too personal. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that the Yoga practices do not refute the Muslim religious obligations. What is more, B.M., the undisputed leader of this group, claims that “Yoga” far from interfering, moreover bolsters the Islamic religious feeling. The different families and personalities are consistent to a varied extent regarding the practices of Yoga. Some have stopped the active practicing of Yoga, though they have not lost interest in its spiritual aspects. Others practicing it to date are consistent and stringent vegetarians, together with their entire families (including the children). For the time elapsed from our first meeting in 1996, certain representatives of the third trend among the local “Yoga” have further advanced in mastering this science and have outstripped their local teacher B.M.

⁸ An investigation of a conflict situation that cropped up in the Rhodopes in 1995 gives an idea of these differences. Cf. Garnizov 1997: 71

What is the most important, however, is that Yoga is a window to the world for those practicing it. Three of the men have spent time of varied duration in a spiritual centre in Greece. Some gurus pay visits to Draginovo, putting up at the homes of their followers. That teaching had first been “brought” to Draginovo by B.M., who had been captivated by it during his university studies in Sofia. In this way, he and the group of “Yoga” as a whole, communicate with outstanding Bulgarian intellectuals of nationwide fame and take pride in this.

As a whole, the behaviour of that *sui generis* confessional “minority within the minority” is variously assessed by some more conservative inhabitants of the village. They call B.M. “a Sofiote”, thereby marking his symbolic distancing from the village community. On the other hand, the young and educated inhabitants of Draginovo have a negative attitude to and call “senseless” the extreme manifestations of traditionalistic behaviour on the part of some representatives of “the elderly” in the village. These concealed tensions are evidence of contradictions and divergent trends in the cultural identity, symbolised by commitment to some or other values.

Whether by accident or not, it is precisely from among the “Yoga” that people surface who are actively searching outlets on a national and international level. Such a one is artist Svetoslav Baramov who staged a one-man show in Sofia in September 1999. Stemming from this group again is the recording and releasing of two CDs (released by GeGa Music) presenting performances of authentic local folklore. Thanks to the energy of those same people, the Korova folklore ensemble performed at two international cultural events in 2000: “Open Europe” in Berlin in May, and an international folklore festival in France in the second half of August. The group has been the bearer both of a number of national and of international awards of folk song and dance festivals, the most valuable among which has been the Silver Axe Grand Prix (2003) from the Zakopane (Poland) festival, which enjoys high prestige.

On the other hand, the active presence of folklore as a living cultural reality in the village, and the indisputable “ethnographic exotica” attract guests from the country and from abroad, who want to get in touch with the original atmosphere of the village. These are most often intellectuals: writers, journalists, artists, musicians, university lecturers and students. No doubt, the village community takes the greatest pride in the visits, paid by Bulgarian and foreign TV crews, which are mostly interested in shooting weddings, as the most outstanding manifestation of the local exotica.

Finally, it could be said that the infiltration of the Yoga ideas and practices in the village of Draginovo has probably been an expression and a result of the vacillations in the identity. On the other hand, this infiltration is likewise a window to the world and a justification for openness and a kind of cosmopolitanism of the group of “Yoga people”, who feel as part of the great wide world.

Conclusion. The investigation in the village of Draginovo brings out just one of the trends characterising the Bulgarian Muslims during the past few years. The state of vacillation is also associated with the search for a more prestigious identity, and in some other enclaves, the process of search has resulted in drawing closer and identification with one of the two bigger communities: of the Bulgarians or of the ethnic Turks. The vacillating identity, however, can also be defined as one kind of identity. Bulgaria’s economic problems (felt with greater acuteness here) contribute to the further complication of the picture. The cultural diglossia is an expression of internal uncertainty, but in addition to this, it is acknowledged by the village inhabitants as part of the local cultural specificity, too. The existence and behaviour of the “Yoga people” in Draginovo comes to show that the vacillating identity can be not just an expression of internal uncertainty, but it may also induce cultural diversity and specific cosmopolitanism, and ultimately – a renovation and expansion of the cultural horizons.

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